



Rapid e-learning

Core Insights

Thinking Rapid – Rapid Thinking

Fast route to the top, or a road to nowhere? With so much hype and scepticism around Rapid e-learning, what's the reality? What should your approach be? Is "rapid" worth your investment, should it be part of your journey? What will it mean to you, your team and your learning organisation?

Elearnity have created a series of independent insights that will help you put Rapid e-learning into perspective. This is the first. It examines what Rapid e-learning is, how it can be applied, some of the perceived issues with this approach and some cost models for developing programmes.

May 2008

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About Elearnity

Elearnity is Europe's leading independent Learning Analyst providing independent expert research, analysis and advice on corporate learning, e-learning and learning technologies. We provide expert independent advice to help organisations accelerate and de-risk their corporate learning innovations.

All our services are underpinned by a unique independent expert understanding of corporate learning based on extensive research and independent market profiling. We provide two core services:

- Learning and e-learning Analyst Research with in-depth best practice research, strategic market analysis, news and commentary
- Independent Advisory Consultancy on strategy and best practice

Our research and analysis covers key innovations that are challenging corporate learning organisations; learning transformation, e-learning and blended learning, learning management strategy and systems, the impact of learning and increasing value-added, integrating learning within talent management and performance.

Elearnity's research process focuses on developing deep insights of corporate realities and best practice, and independent understanding of vendor capabilities and actual performance.

Our analysis and advisory process focuses on providing objective unbiased advice *specific to your organisation and business context*.

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INTRODUCTION

There is so much debate about Rapid e-learning, but still there are many unanswered questions and many unknowns.

In order to help you to start to assess **Rapid e-learning** for your organisation, Elearnity have created a suite of white papers that consider the *high level* implications of Rapid e-learning.

The purpose of the white papers is to help you develop your thinking about Rapid e-learning. They may not provide you with all the answers, but they will start to inform and broaden your view.

They cover three initial perspectives:

- Core Insights into Rapid e-learning
- Managing Rapid e-learning
- The Strategic Impact of Rapid e-learning

We have also created an Executive ViewPoint which provides a high level summary of Rapid e-learning for senior managers. These will be available from our website. www.elearnity.com.

This is the first white paper in that series. It looks at what Rapid e-learning is, reflects on some of the tools, the sorts of projects that may be suitable and the perceived issues for this approach.

DEFINING RAPID E-LEARNING?

What is Rapid?

Trying to find a consistent definition for Rapid e-learning from vendors and commentators isn't easy, as most perspectives are narrowed by what they are trying to sell. Invariably, the core of it comes down to time. After all that's what "rapid" means - it happens quickly.

Adjective: rapid (comparative more rapid, superlative most rapid)

Describes a process or concept which occurs quickly. (Wiktionary)

What is really useful about this definition is that it covers the two sides of what "rapid" means to you as a purchaser of learning content. "Rapid" describes both a process and a concept.

More than tools

From the simplest perspective Rapid e-learning is characterised as a set of "rapid" authoring tools for user developed content. Typically Rapid e-learning is quick to develop, it's created against a short timescale and it is usually bite sized for the learner. It's also knowledge focussed, it handles subjects that are narrow or have a low level of complexity and the content has a relatively short shelf life. In some cases Rapid e-learning is disposable and it usually happens when there is little or no budget.

Why is it important?

What is important about a "rapid" approach is that it affects the way you look at more established routines of creating traditional e-learning content. Rapid e-learning effects the market it operates within, your approach to budgeting, the tools you use, your e-learning team, the processes they follow and your entire approach to creating learning solutions as a whole. There are best practice Rapid e-learning techniques that may well influence all of the learning technologies you employ.



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A new perspective on traditional content


Rapid e-learning and the techniques that make it effective are readily applied to your other learning channels. By looking at the world of e-learning from a “rapid” perspective there are also significant impacts it should have on your e-learning strategy and how you direct your team’s efforts and resources.

How fast is Rapid e-learning?

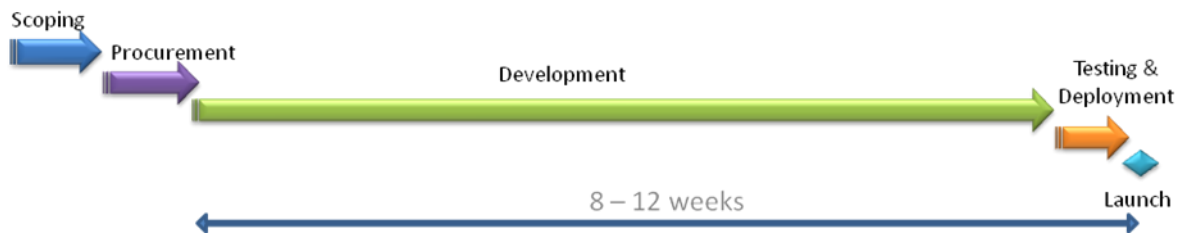
Let’s get back to definitions. If “rapid” is all about speed to delivery, how quickly does something need to happen before it can be classed as a piece of Rapid e-learning content? In the traditional e-learning development cycle you would look for a standard piece of content to take between 8 to 12 weeks for a notional 1 hours worth of content.

Insights...

“...rapid e-learning isn’t just the quick appearance of an e-learning course because of some rapid authoring tools - it’s also about streamlining the processes used to create content and devolved content creation. .”



Traditional Development Cycle

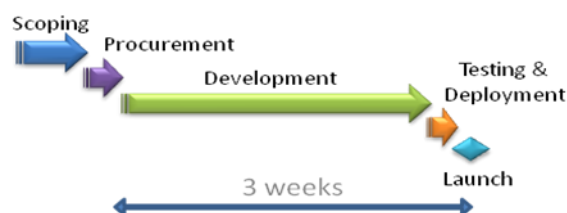


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How long someone really took to go through that hour? Well, who ever really knew, but objectively it was about 50-60 screens long. It would contain moderate levels of interactivity, some graphic treatment to support your programmes theme, layout treatments and a reasonable level of instructional design. That may also, or not in most cases, include the peripheral activities of vendor selection and contract negotiation and content testing.

So, to be “rapid” how long should it really take to develop – from concept to launch? Self-styled leaders in Rapid e-learning market have set a benchmark of about 3 weeks, to generate content from the point of engagement. That sounds like a fair estimate, especially if you look at it from the angle of traditional content.

Rapid Development Cycle



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“Ultra rapid” E-learning

In the purest form, with the right sort of preparation and commitment, you could be looking at a 10 day complete turnaround from go to launch. But, actually when you look at Rapid e-learning from the wider perspective of learning technologies, beyond the narrow view of traditional materials, you should really be thinking about 3 hours to 3 weeks.

Ultra Rapid Development Cycle



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3 hours may sound like a stretch. But, ultimately, the window of opportunity for “ultra content” is much wider than most e-learning providers would have you see. If you take in the whole view, “rapid” can almost be instantaneous.

And that’s why it’s important to look at Rapid e-learning through independent eyes and see all the other clear “rapid” opportunities.

Rapid e-learning or Rapid E-training

Traditional e-learning = e-training

The picture of what Rapid e-learning is in terms of hard outputs usually narrows down to *traditional e-learning* content.

This is invariably about **e-training** materials delivered using electronic media.

Why highlight **e-training**? Basically, because it is about creating a training course, in the traditional training sense. The focus is on a training outcome. Not necessarily a learning outcome.

It’s a natural and current reality that matches most expectations.

That’s where most of the market is focused, that’s where most purchasers have their thinking, that’s the output and product that most organisations want to buy.

The focus is on providing an outcome that falls into the safe statement... “Here is the training for.....” So, it’s about a traditional training output.

In the “rapid” world the creation of the traditional e-training

Insights...

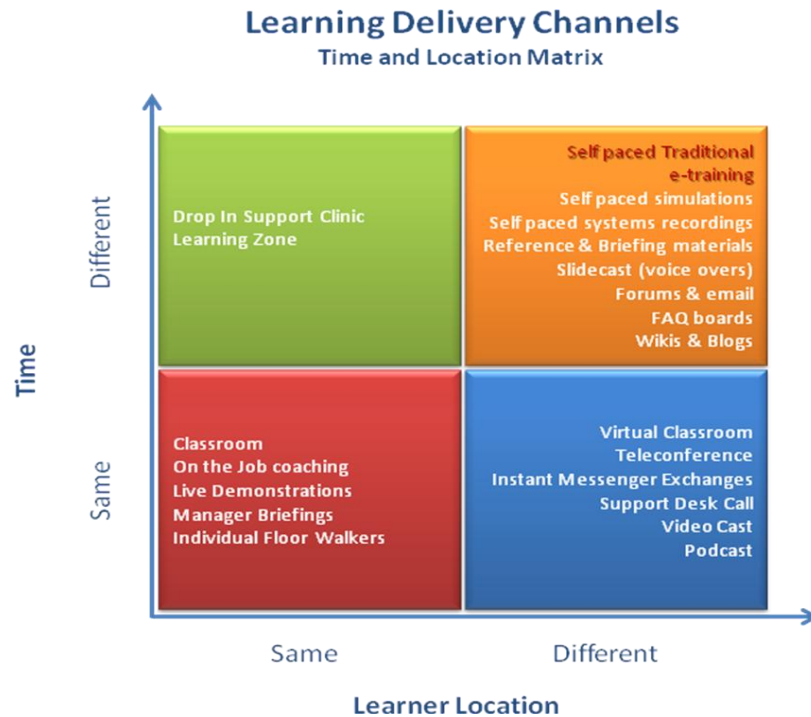
“Producing traditional e-courseware isn’t the only route to rapid e-learning - there are different modes, different techniques using different media that are equally important. You need to see them all, to really put rapid e-learning into its widest perspective.”



usually means the use of off-the shelf e-learning authoring tools. This is a departure from the more proprietary, developer orientated development software, that most external suppliers would have historically trapped your assets in.

More than traditional e-learning

Producing traditional e-courseware isn’t the only route to Rapid e-learning. There are different modes and different techniques that use different media that are equally important. You need to see them all, to really put Rapid e-learning into its widest perspective.



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So, let’s classify some of those modes of e-learning and reflect on how they could, and should, affect your perception of Rapid e-learning.

If you take the archetypal “same / different place and time model” of learning channels, it’s easy to see how the market emphasis of what “rapid” is skewed towards development orientated approaches.

Part of the blend

Even a cursory look through the chart provides a view onto a wider blend of Rapid e-learning.

There is a richer mix of techniques that should be part of your solutions.

At the end of the day will any single method truly provide you with a magic road to success? The honest answer is no. But there is no reason why a combination of learning methods wouldn’t put you on the right track.

If you take another look at the matrix, with a wider vision than just typical asynchronous methods, you will also see that some of the tools would enable you to hit an “ultra rapid” output. These would put 3 weeks development into the shade.

You could have compelling, immediate and contextual, expert learning aids available in hours. Podcast, presentation slide deck, video cast, video-blog and virtual classroom will all provide a valid and important part of your “rapid” arsenal. And they shouldn’t be overlooked.

By having the right subject matter expert, with the right passion, with the right compelling personality and who is able to capture the subject; you really could create a positive learning outcome almost immediately.


Admittedly, there are a few conditions there. Not everyone is a natural broadcaster. But what really could be more “rapid” in our videophone, online world?

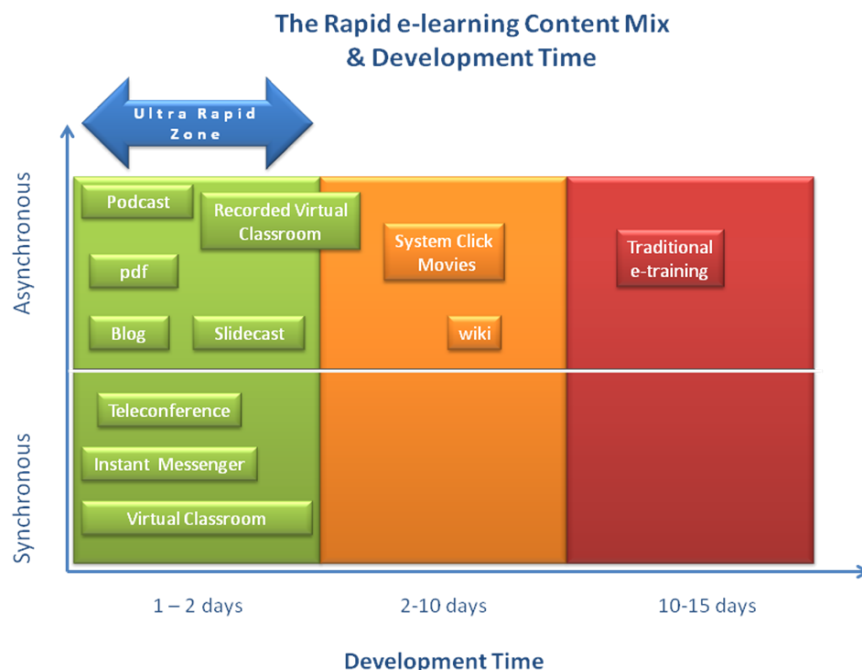
In reality, those skills will probably not be wide spread across most organisations. Who has “media communications” as a core organisational competency for its people anyway? Should it be there?

In a forward thinking organisation? Yes! But, these niche skills usually get wrapped up into broad competency sets labelled “communication” and they are lost.

Insights...

“With a blended approach comes the need for maturity and guidance in how you create the most effective and viable blend to meet your learning need. It moves beyond the view of implementing a training intervention into implementing a learning solution.”





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The essential point is that “rapid” has a presence beyond the narrow view of traditional content. It means so much more. This is especially true if you choose to embrace it as part of your wider blend of learning channels.

With a blended approach comes the need for maturity and guidance in how you create the most effective and viable blends to meet your learning needs. It moves beyond the view of implementing a training intervention into implementing learning solutions.

Will you get this whole view from the Rapid e-learning developing community? Yes, sometimes, but only if you ask the right questions.

These “other” solutions may not be top of their agenda, primarily because it could be pushing their margins in the wrong direction. As a result, they could also be pushing you in the wrong direction for your budgets.

When it's the only way

The grim reality is that when you need to get “something” out there, “something” is 100 times better than nothing. This is especially true for your stakeholders.

In these circumstances, having the time and maturity to position the right blend and the right “rapid” mix to get the right outcomes can be a step too far.

But, just because it seems that way, doesn't mean you shouldn't invest in creating the best outcome rather than an outcome. And, if you don't have the expertise to help you create that perspective you probably should be talking to people who can help provide that view.

Insights...

“By having the right subject matter expert, with the right passion, with the right compelling personality, and who is able to capture the subject; you could create a positive learning outcome in a matter of hours...”



RAPID E-LEARNING TECHNOLOGIES – “THE TOOLS”

Tools are usually the starting point for discussions on Rapid e-learning in organisations. There are several risks with this approach, not least that every problem starts to look like a nail because the preferred, if not the only tool, is a hammer.

A diverse toolset is likely to promote a more appropriate response to diverse problems and opportunities.

So, in labelling “rapid” tools coherently they have been categorised into virtual training tools, rapid e-training authoring tools, e-briefing tools and e-collaboration tools.

All of these tools enable Rapid e-learning solutions.

Rapid e-Training Authoring Tools

The most common toolsets associated with Rapid e-learning create traditional courseware through a simple user front end.

The comparative usability of these platforms varies, but their intention is to enable lower technically skilled developers to create content, so they are never overly complex.

The actual range of tools available is extensive and it would be difficult to list them all here. At the higher end of capability also comes increased complexity which may make some of the more functional solutions less attractive to novice users.

Rapid e-Training solutions fall into three categories.

- Desktop tools
- Server based tools
- Learning Content Management Systems

Desktop Tools

Client based solutions are installed locally on your computer. They can be template driven and have a range of inbuilt interactions.

As a developer you have a higher level of control and flexibility and it is harder for a central group to regulate materials by enforcing the adoption of templates. The range of tools in this category is extensive.

Some focus on software simulations like Capivate and others more on creating generic courseware such as Articulate, Lectora, rapidL and eXe.

Insights...

“Tools are usually the starting point for discussions on rapid e-learning in organisations. There are several risks with this approach, not least that every problem starts to look like a nail because the preferred, if not the only tool, is a hammer. A diverse toolset is likely to promote a more appropriate response to diverse problems and opportunities.”



Server-based tools

The server-based tools are hosted on a server either internally or externally. This allows a more collaborative development process and potentially the sharing of assets between developers. They aim to provide a template driven development experience with a range of prescribed interactions. Examples of these solutions are Atlantic Link, Mohive, Composica, and Coursebuilder.

These tools can incorporate rich content from a variety of sources such as Flash objects and video. As with all tools they come alive with the creative thinking associated with good instructional design and a good understanding of the audience.

The most significant trend in server-based solutions is a move to entirely web-enabled systems that do not require local desktop plug-ins.

Learning Content Management Systems

Learning Content Management Systems are enterprise-wide solutions that are one step beyond server and desktop tools in their functionality, being designed to support large scale development through larger development teams. They have the added capability of managing version control, content expiry and deployment in addition to authoring.

They typically have more prescribed and controlled development processes, and in consequence they may be less intuitive and flexible than stand-alone desktop tools. Assets, such as graphics, are managed through the solution through a central repository, which maximises their reuse and the consistency of courseware.

Suppliers of these solutions include Eedo Knowledgeware, OutStart, Xyleme and Giunti Labs, as well as Learning Management suite providers such as SumTotal Systems and Saba.

Virtual Classrooms

These are potentially the fastest and most immediate tools for providing learning and development to dispersed audiences. They almost fall into the class of ultra rapid.

If you have a genuine subject authority, access to the information they want to share, be that slide decks, process diagrams or systems, then they are practically immediate. And beyond the preparation by the person delivering the webcast/tutorial there is very limited overhead on an e-learning team. This channel can be ideal for systems training.

The sorts of tools that enable you to do this in the corporate space include Adobe Connect, WebEx, Centra and Microsoft Live Meeting. Commonly these are solutions that are best used via web hosting – although they can often be deployed within the firewall in a bespoke implementation.

These tools have the added benefit of being able to record sessions for playback. One inspiring individual can have created a solution that can brief thousands in a matter of hours. Ultra-rapid.

Insights...

“As with all tools they come alive with the creative thinking associated with good instructional design and good understanding of the audience.”



e-Briefing Tools

Visual e-Briefing tools typically convert slides into e-learning materials. Some allow the application of quizzes and voice-overs, such as Adobe Presenter and they often involve converting slide decks into Flash outputs.

Audio briefing tools would be represented by Podcasts and live Skype-casts.

e-Collaboration Tools

These tool-sets cover informal training and briefing approaches. The tool-sets in this delivery channel are wikis, blogs, discussion forums, instant messenger and chat rooms.

They rely on a shared infrastructure being in place and are ready to go after a very limited amount of user introduction. Once created, they can be maintained by subject matter experts. They are simple and low in technical sophistication – so they do not require technical expertise to use.



Another key dimension which makes some of these collaboration solutions truly effective is RSS feeds - *Really Simple Syndication*. This automatically enables subscribers to know that an update to a discussion has happened, rather than them having to remember to track postings.

Tools and e-learning organisation

The final and most significant element of the selection process is how the tools fit into your wider strategy.

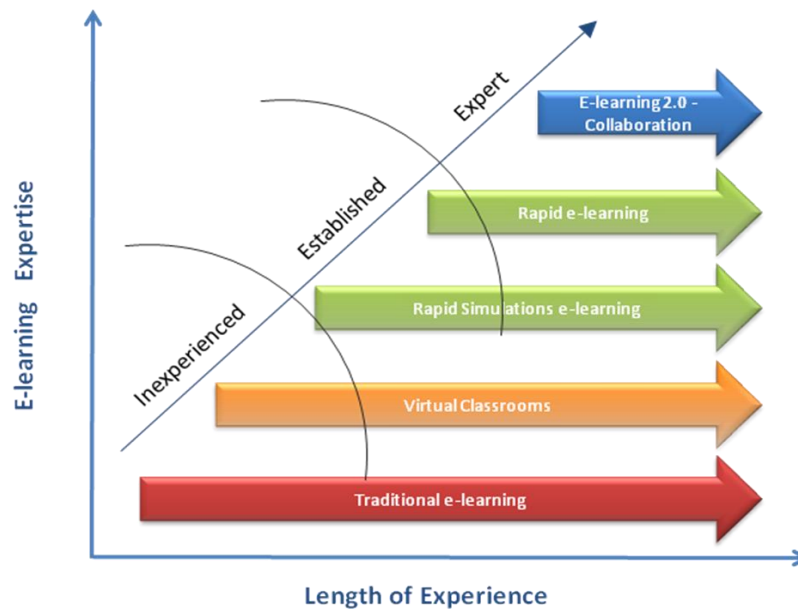
Whether you are pursuing a centralised, distributed or localised production model, different tools and combinations of tools will have a clearer alignment to your strategy. A single tool set, however, is unlikely to hold the answer to all your problems and you will need a mix of tools to be successful.

As e-learning practice has evolved, so to have the toolsets which support it. Over the past 10 years, there has been a steady growth in the range of solutions that can be applied. The cultural acceptability of different approaches has also grown and what was unique and cutting edge a few years ago is now main-stream in people's consciousness.

If you would have asked someone what a Blog was 10 years ago, most people would have stared blankly back at you. But now, you would have to be a "media hermit" not to know what they are. They are an everyday part of life.

So, whilst 10 years ago most solutions were Traditional e-learning courses, as experience and toolsets have matured over time, and now you see the proliferation of blogs or forums to support communication and learning.

E-learning Evolution Model Team Expertise & Learning Delivery Channels



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What seems to happen in e-learning teams, is that as an understanding grows of how best to apply e-learning, through experience in most cases, their understanding also grows of where traditional approaches fall short. They then seek ways to apply new techniques to solve their problems. As this starts to happen, the tools they use begin to diversify. These newer tools achieve different outcomes to those they would have created previously, precisely because they know that traditional e-learning solutions aren't always the right answer.

Is it possible to accelerate through the e-learning evolution model with a team with limited experience?

Yes, very possibly, given the right independent support and advice. But, without advice you will invariably have to learn to walk with more basic approaches, before you run with the newer ones.


The Selection Process

The range of tools and the complexity of matching them to your needs is not for the faint hearted. For an objective assessment of tools to be conducted properly takes experience and a wider insight.

Whilst costs are low in many of the authoring tools, actually finding the right tools that will enable you to have flexibility and create the most efficient and effective impacts in your organisation can be fraught with danger. It is possible to make expensive mistakes. So, use other people's independent insights and experience to guide you through your selection processes.

Insights...

“Whether you are pursuing a centralised, distributed or localised production model, different tools and combinations of tools will have a clearer alignment to your strategy. A single tool set, however, is unlikely to hold the answer to all your problems and you will need a mix of tools to be successful.”



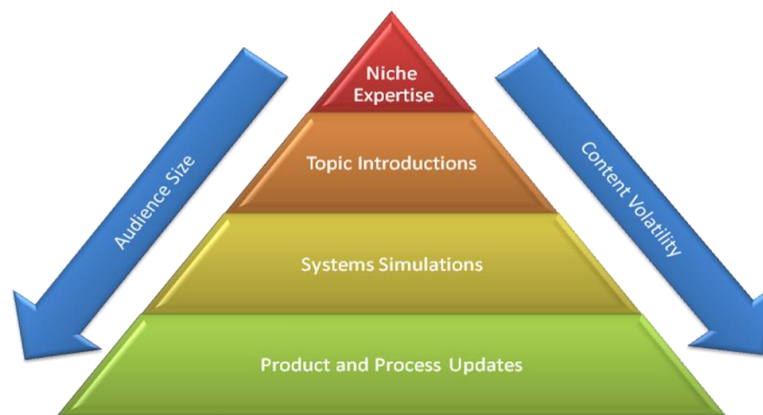
WHAT PROJECTS ARE SUITABLE FOR RAPID E-LEARNING?

There are two ways of looking at suitability. One is from the angle of what sort of *projects* are suitable. The other is from the wider angle of what sort of *learning outcomes* are suitable for “rapid” development.

Popular Rapid e-Learning Projects

There are a number of common types of Rapid e-learning projects that cover briefings, updates, introductions, systems tours and deep dives into niche expertise. These involve topics such as software, processes, products, and technical expertise. In terms of popularity, introductions, briefings and simulations are usually the first projects to move in the direction of Rapid e-learning. These topics are relatively simple and narrow in scope.

Rapid e-learning Project Hierarchy



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Suitable Rapid e-learning Outcomes

Whilst projects are probably the easiest place to start with Rapid e-learning, outcomes are much more important when it comes to working out what projects are really suitable for that approach.

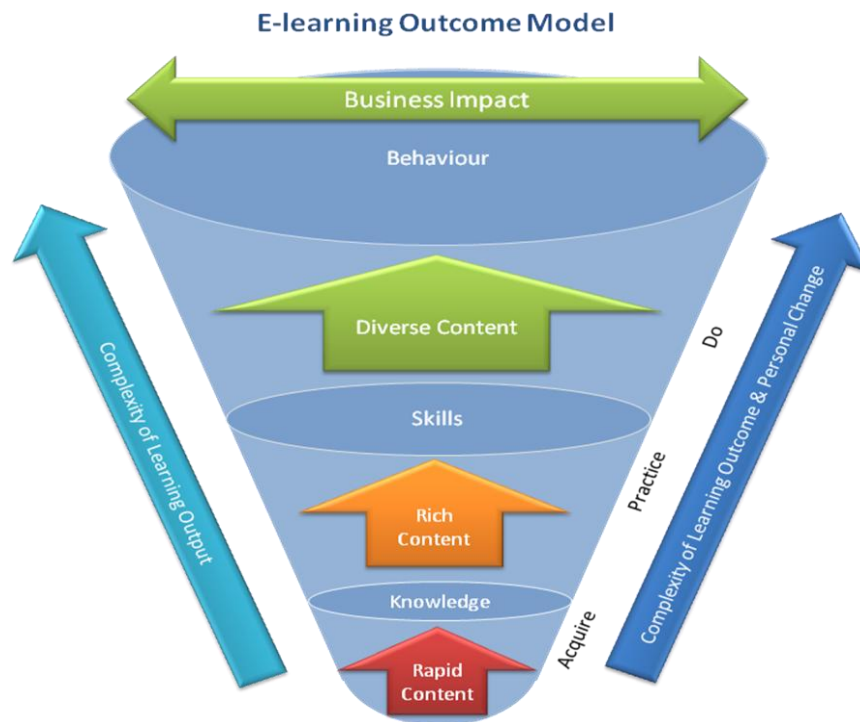
Knowledge not Skills

If your aspirations are to transfer a limited amount of knowledge, then creating a complimentary mix of briefing tools, memory aids, knowledge joggers, on the job reference and revision aids, that have low investment, may just be the solution.

Where you need to effect more significant behavioural change, then the question of whether you can do this at all through any single event may be questionable – be they online or instructor led .

Knowledge Not Behaviour

But, what may not go without saying is, that the more significant the personal movement, the more investment needs to be made by the learner in the change programme. At this point just “good enough” may have been part of the solution but it is by no means the only solution.



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In terms of aligning methods to outcomes, a pragmatic place to position “rapid” content is as a building block to building knowledge. If richness is required to build a level of competency beyond basic recall and comprehension, it may be useful to think that “rapid” content has a ceiling both in terms of its ability to affect skills and behaviour. It may be best to position Rapid e-learning solely at the level of knowledge acquisition.


If you are looking to build skills, then richer and more diverse content is necessary to have a real outcome.

At the final layer of making genuine behaviour change, most of the evidence seems to indicate that whatever you do, what is essential is that it is supported by proactively seeking feedback from your peers, subordinates and superiors.

It makes the likelihood of actually changing greater than random chance. In this context a rich blend is needed to maintain the focus. It aims to encourage reflection on what behaviours should have changed. In the simplest terms it’s the difference between having knowledge of health and safety and maintaining an active

Insights...

“So, rapid e-learning is not a toolset that is likely to be able to enable complex learning outcomes on its own. But, even in the guise of e-training, it may well be a useful stepping stone on the path to a more significant business impact.”



health and safety culture. So, Rapid e-learning is not a toolset that is likely to be able to enable complex learning outcomes on its own. Even in the form of e-training, it may well be a useful stepping stone on the path to a more significant business impact. In its more informal guise, rapid solutions like blogs and forums can have a part to play in consolidating learners' behaviours as they pass through personal development programmes. They are an important part of the Blend.

Why, What & When? Criteria for choosing Rapid e-learning

Rapid e-learning Selection Criteria

So, when it comes to choosing whether to use “rapid” what are the criteria that you need to use to ensure that the media has the desired effect.

Criteria	Thinking	
Knowledge Focussed	<p>It is wise to restrain your level of ambition about the impact any single online programme can have, however well written and designed it is.</p> <p>Projects that are knowledge biased rather than change biased are probably safe ground for a “rapid” project. Look at them in a similar way that you would consider a briefing, rather than a truly transformational learning exercise.</p>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Tight Development Timescales	<p>Obviously where you need to develop and deliver a solution quickly, “rapid” would be the most appropriate choice, especially when it’s a question of “rapid” or nothing.</p>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Timeliness – Responding to individual’s demand	<p>This is especially true of user support. Waiting even three weeks will not be quick enough when the answer you need is now!</p> <p>Responding to and capturing an answer which can then act as reference for a wider audience, is an essential element of what “rapid” thinking can provide, through the use of a Wiki, Forum or Blog.</p>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Clear Context, Light Treatment or Narrow Scope	<p>This is ultimately about having a clear brief and laser like precision on what outcomes are necessary. It’s about covering a narrow or shallow section not the entire subject.</p> <p>So, in reality that means a very precise dive into a single subject – in a way that it would enlighten an existing expert, or providing the high level summary for a novice.</p>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Low complexity	<p>If the outcomes from the training are complex in terms of skills application or significant behaviours change then a “rapid” solution may well fall short of your expectations.</p>	<input type="checkbox"/>

	<p>If you are looking to provide awareness and recall training then you may succeed. But if you have sophisticated models that need to become part of the routine workflow, then you will want to supplement any “rapid” solutions with more complex simulations or instructional design.</p> <p>If you have a simple linear message, “rapid” is more appropriate. Where there are conditional branching and larger variables then your outputs are naturally more complex and complexity takes time to develop as a programme.</p>	
Availability of Subject Matter Authority	<p>Getting a subject matter expert is not enough in a “rapid” development programme.</p> <p>Having the right and most authoritative subject matter expert is essential to enable you to compress your sign offs. Content needs to be unequivocally right first time, or you will fall into a traditional development cycle.</p>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Stretched or Low Budget	<p>When money is a constraint there are three choices, ask for more, spend on something smaller, or buy more at a cheaper rate.</p> <p>This is the reality of most situations and the later are usually the more likely outcomes. So, if money is tight you should be critically considering your options – less or cheaper?</p>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Systems orientated	<p>If you are trying to deliver systems training, then you won’t go far wrong with some investment in a “rapid” solution as part of your deliverable.</p> <p>This is particularly true if you are rolling out system updates, whereas if you are introducing a completely new system you would ideally want a little more air cover through other media channels.</p> <p>Another thing to consider is how much Electronic Performance Support Systems would really provide you with the most effective and complete long term solution.</p>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Self Sustaining	<p>If you want to enable learning at a closer level between an expert group and their clients then you will probably want to employ some “rapid” tools and approaches to ensure the solution is self sustaining.</p> <p>This is important where there is a high level of volatility in the content and the quality of design is less of an issue.</p>	<input type="checkbox"/>

If the outcome you are looking to achieve is mass production with minimal effort then “rapid” approaches are going to be right for you. It is a natural evolution of production; “artisan” methods become accessible to less crafting hands.

If you are looking for a masterpiece, then keep to the tools, techniques and skills of people who can craft that for you. If you are happy with something that is of the moment, disposable and fit for purpose, what other choice would you have other than to use a “rapid” approach?

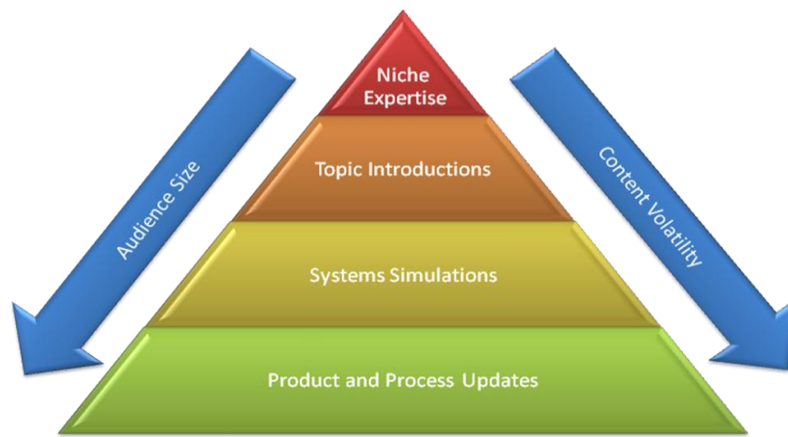
Smaller Audiences and More Volatile Content

One the effects of having lower costs and faster development rates is that the economics of producing e-learning content for smaller audiences and more volatile content is less challenging a hurdle.

In a traditional world, it is often too expensive to create solutions for small audiences. What might be an economic ceiling of 1000 users for a traditional course, in the “rapid world” becomes 500 at half the price.

Or, if you use “rapid” tool sets and virtual classrooms, then tens of users is a viable audience where previously it would have been hundreds.

Rapid e-learning Project Hierarchy



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In the traditional e-learning approach, the model tends to filter out projects with smaller audiences sizes. As the cost and speed to deployment reduces through the application of leaner processes and more efficient methods of development the threshold where e-learning isn’t viable lowers too.

This means that through the judicious use of a range of approaches you can dramatically increase the depth and volume of learning that happens within your organisation.

Besides this trend to reducing numbers in the e-learning project threshold, there is also a trend to deploy increasingly volatile content – which in the past would have carried too high an overhead to maintain.

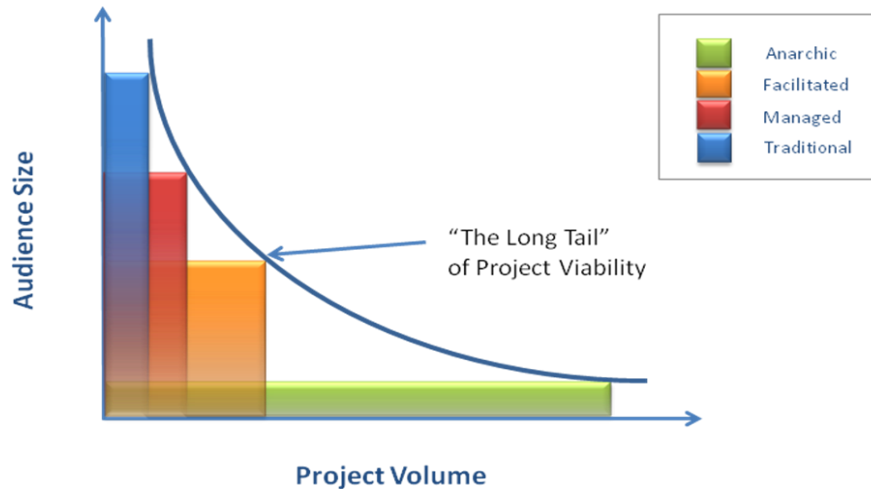
This expansion into what could be considered as niche activity is analogous to the “The Long Tail”.

Insights...

“One the effects of having lower costs and faster development rates is that the economics of producing e-learning content for smaller audiences and more volatile content is less challenging a hurdle.”



Impact of Rapid e-learning Tools & Management Approaches on Project Viability



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It’s the business model that Amazon is built on. They don’t just sell high volumes of the best seller lists; much of their success is down to the large volume of diverse and low selling titles they provide. This is a pattern found extensively on the internet. Using this principle with Rapid e-learning you can now consider creating disposable content, where the content is out of date in 6 months or less. Again, it is essential to stress that this is not a one way or another choice.

The really significant point about the “Long Tail” is how you use different e-learning project management approaches to maximise your effect on your organisation. It’s really about blending your approach and your toolsets to increase your reach.

By using more informal approaches you enable a wider range of learning.

Bite-sized Chunks


One of the key features of Rapid e-learning is the trend to providing learners with smaller, more bite-sized chunks.

Whilst the traditional e-learning course may well have taken anything over an hour to complete, what is particularly interesting with the “rapid” approach is that modules are often targeted to last about 20 minutes. This represents potentially a third of the old course duration. The chunking of material into more manageable sizes for the learner is an important development, because it is weighting the material in the favour of the learner, rather than the subject matter.

It makes projects much more modular and much more tuned into the way the brain works.

Insights...

“The really significant point about the “Long Tail” is how you use different e-learning project management approaches to maximise your effect on your organisation.”



Permanent Feature of the “Blend”

Blended learning unjustly had many detractors when it was muted as a concept at the start of this millennium. For those of you who have missed the boat on multichannel learning, and the structuring of multiple interventions to aid development, it isn't too late to reconsider.

To look at any single channel as the answer to training, learning and development need is extremely naive. Creating steps to learning using different and targeted stimuli is the way to create deep and ongoing development. “Rapid” approaches are a critical part of the Blend and they are here to stay. So, harness them wisely.

If you don't have a Blended Learning Strategy, you really should to talk to someone with an independent perspective, to put you on the right path. “Rapid” is going to be a permanent feature of the “Blend”.

What is “Good Enough”?

A significant debate since the emergence of Rapid e-learning has been how good does the content need to be for it to be effective? What is “good enough”?

What has prompted this question? This concern is voiced because content is increasingly being developed by subject matter experts, rather than professional e-learning teams. Is this concern genuine? In real terms, “good enough” can apply to Instructional Design, Graphics Design, Timeliness and Learning Outcome.



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Instructional Design & Interactivity

In most cases e-training is a sit back and watch medium, rather than a sit forward and think exercise. The truth is that whatever way you look at the richness of the content, if it doesn't engage the brain it will not work effectively. In all senses of the phrase, “good enough”, may be alright if it is at the level of experience, knowledge and capability of the learner. Ultimately it may not be “good enough” without adequate creativity, skills and thought in the instructional design. This is the magic that turns an experience of the eyes and ears into a stimulus for the brain.

Exaggeration, novelty, humour, intrigue and suspense are keys to creating an effect solution. They are not necessarily functionality you will find in any e-learning development tool-set. These are also, not necessarily skills you will find in your subject matter experts.

Graphical Design

The “good enough” debate has also been about the elegance and beauty of the materials as an aid to learning. Now beauty is in the eye of the beholder, so how effective a gauge “good enough” is, will always going to be a subjective discussion.

Ultimately, matching the quality of the imagery to brand and the users' real circumstances is probably the most critical aspect of Graphic Design. Having “real” pictures in a suitable layout will most likely trump an

exquisite design which doesn't bare any relationship to what users will see and experience day to day. Mirroring reality is more important than graphical beauty, because this creates a connection to the learning. It makes it specific and contextual.

The only caveat here is that, we are becoming increasingly media savvy – so we are less likely to tolerate, or take serious – extremely amateurish pictures and graphic work. After all – if someone couldn't be bothered to package the material neatly for me... why should I be bother? It's a fine balancing act.

Content

This is simple – if the content isn't accurate then the training is worthless. In the “traditional world” controls were always in place to make sure that the content was rigorously approved. Having the subject matter authority is critical to creating good enough materials. But, it's also about matching the level of content to the user. Pitching lots of detailed materials to a novice isn't good enough – just as pitching novice content to an expert wouldn't be good enough.

Good enough has to be based on tailoring the objectives of the course and to the capability of the learner.

Timeliness

One of the main features of “rapid” is the concept of timeliness, getting the content to an exact audience at the pace that they need to receive it. If the business world is moving faster and faster, then you also need to be able to respond at a faster speed. Being able to respond in a timely way to a business driver is a significant step in the direction of using a “rapid” approach. This is where “good enough” really comes into its own, because perfect timing with good enough content will always beat a “**great but late**” solution every time!

Learning Outcomes

The most important aspect of any programme is its impact.

There is limited and anecdotal evidence that what can be described as “just good enough”, timely solutions, are not that significantly different in their impact as more engineered ones. Often they can be better, precisely because they are honed to the moment.

Context is king.

In a practical sense, your ability to engage learners in learning rather than have them just sit there, may be one of the most effective filters on whether “just good enough” is really good enough.

So, perhaps the key to success for all projects is timeliness, context and above all the quality of the content.... not in terms of the richness, but the alignment of the content to the learners needs.

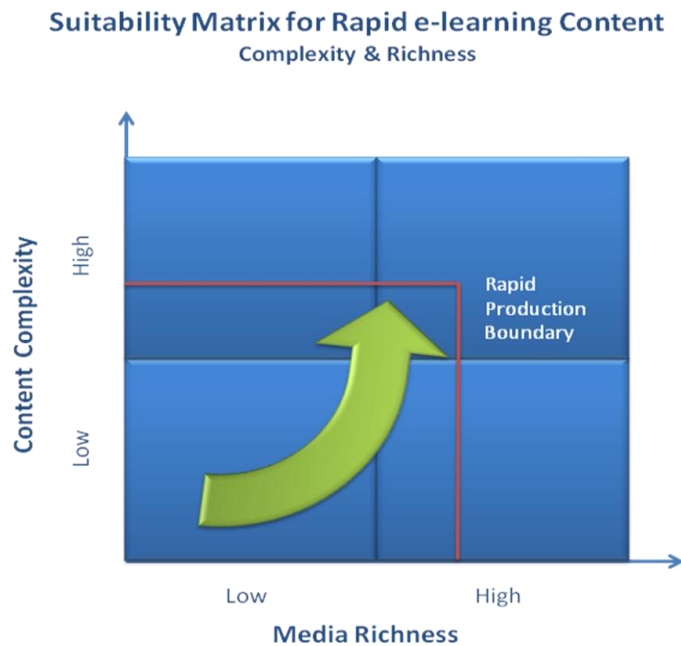
Insights...

“... the key to success is timeliness, context and above all the quality of the content.... not in terms of the richness, but the alignment of the content to the learners needs. “



When Rapid e-learning isn't Right

Is a “rapid” approach appropriate for every situation? In the broadest sense, of attempting to conduct an e-learning project with the maximum efficiency, then there are compelling reasons to dump the bureaucracy. When all things are considered, it is unlikely that “rapid” solutions will be right for all situations.



It's all to Complex

Generally speaking “rapid” solutions may fall short when there is high complexity – whether that is the instructional design, interactivity or richness of assets. So, there is in effect a boundary of instructional design and media richness that would *currently* make a 3 week timeline difficult to achieve.

Complex Instructional Design

So, “rapid” may not be appropriate when there is high complexity in the content itself and a need for a high level of instructional design to engage the learner. This would be particularly true where scenario branching is required and situations where skill outcomes are more important than knowledge acquisition.

There are emerging tools that focus on rapidly developing scenarios. The tools, however, are only part of the answer. The important consideration with scenarios is that their development time is usually taken up with writing credible branches as much as it is with developing the actual courseware .

Complex Model Emulation

“Rapid” is unlikely to be desirable where there are high levels of interactivity required for models, workflow and emulations, particularly for products and physical environments.

Digitising the real world and making it interactive and enabling learners to explore takes time. This is especially true if the emulation has variables which can be adjusted to demonstrate the effect of changes to the system.

For example, if you wanted to create an interactive demonstration of a jet engine that enabled you to explore how you removed bolts and ran different diagnostic checks –this is not something that you will definitely be able to turn around in less than three weeks. The level of modelling and programming would make this a much more involved process.

Rich Assets

“Rapid” may also not be appropriate where there is a requirement for a significant proportion of rich assets in the content, especially when that involves the creation of specific video assets, or a large number of graphics and flash objects. In these situations the practicalities of creating the content, through programming, graphical design or scripting and filming the material, may well make a “rapid” approach less practical.

If the assets already exist and only need to be assembled, then “rapid” may still be suitable.

Otherwise, the sheer pressures of time make the creation of courseware in these circumstances are much harder to achieve and well may make a “rapid” approach impractical as much as it would be infeasible.

You don't have the skills in-house

It seems obvious, but if you don't have the skills internally to develop all or part of your course then you will need to buy that resource in. You can and should extend your own capabilities. This takes time, so what better way could there be than to augment your team with an external expert and learn from them on the job.

The majority of external providers will be more than happy to act as your partner and build a strong relationship.

You don't have the time to do it

This is a moment of honest realisation that most e-learning teams hit at some point. Resource pressures are such that there just aren't enough hours in the day or night. At this point external or Subject Matter Expert development might be the only way.

This situation also covers the instances where actually it would be just plain faster to have a dedicated and professional set of resources working on the job.

What would take you 6 weeks to develop might only take them 3 weeks by sheer weight of numbers and expertise.

SME Disengagement

Due to the dependency on the Subject Matter Expert, if they and your stakeholders aren't totally engaged in producing the courseware, then all the efforts of producing a Rapid e-learning programme could come to nothing.

So, if there is a high probability that your SME will be overtaken by other things, then a “rapid” approach may not be possible - even though the technique may have been the most appropriate.

High Profile – “The Wow Factor”

“Rapid” may not come high in your selection is when you need a real “WOW”.

That is not to say that “rapid” may not form part of the blend, but your focus may well be on more traditional outcomes and traditional e-learning.

To some extent, you may well want to match the scale of investment in the business project to the levels of investment in the training. Perception is an important variable and sometimes materials need to shine to reflect the importance of the wider programme.

Insights...

*.” if there is a high probability
that your SME’s priorities will be
overtaken by other things, then a
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possible “*



WHAT ARE THE ISSUES WITH RAPID E-LEARNING

The Common Concerns

So, what are the issues with Rapid e-learning projects?

The list below is not exclusive to Rapid e-learning. It is, however, indicative of the common concerns that people have – both justifiably and unjustifiably, about using Rapid e-learning.

Some of these objections are genuine, others can be phantoms. After all, in project management terms – risks can be managed, so that issues don’t appear.

There are three main types of risks, and therefore issues, that you will come across in a “rapid” project.

- Technical
- Instructional
- Content

From a more prosaic perspective the issues with “rapid” solutions are typically voiced as, quality, media richness, interactivity, instructional design, subject matter expertise, project management, procurement and deployment. Some of these are actually a clear subset of the three main types, but you will rarely encounter that neat order when issues are raised in person.

Remember - To avoid issues you will need to manage the risks in your project with experience and care.

<i>Issue</i>	<i>Objections</i>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Quality 	<p>With all those inexperienced SME’s creating their own content is any learning actually going to happening? Is it just a content dump? Will it be good enough? What impact does poor visual design have on your learners?</p>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Media Richness 	<p>Is it just page turning? If assets are poor stock images will they make a connection to the learner? Will learners switch off because it doesn’t look we’ve invested in them? Will you only get great learning when there’s “Wow” graphics and jaw dropping video? It’s not as good as we normally do!</p>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Interactivity 	<p>If it hasn’t got loads of interactivity and swish gadgets, will people learn anything? Does rich media equal lots of learning?</p>

<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Instructional Design 	<p>Can only instructional designers create good content? If it's created by SMEs can it have good instructional design and can it be any good?</p>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • SME Authority & Availability 	<p>The SME will be too busy to pin down to get involved. The subject matter expert doesn't know the latest information – they are too junior and don't have the authority to say what's right! The content isn't ready and no one knows what's the final content should be. They are on holiday! They don't have the right skills!</p>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Project Management 	<p>There isn't enough time to do this properly. I thought this was being managed by the SME? I thought you were doing that!</p>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Procurement Processes 	<p>Our procurement process takes 4 weeks! You need a specific software contract and that will take 3 weeks to draw up! The supplier isn't in the finance system – we have a 10 day SLA for setting up a new one! We never pay standard rates – we need to have this negotiated.</p>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Deployment 	<p>That content doesn't work on our computers! It's the wrong version of Flash. We don't use that Java runtime version! It takes 5 days for the IT group to upload courses! We don't have the bandwidth for that content! We can't do podcasts - sound isn't enabled! It's the wrong version of SCORM. No one studies from home! I don't have a password!</p>

RAPID E-TRAINING MATERIALS - WHAT SHOULD THEY COST?

When you try to create a meaningful comparison between traditional and rapid e-training solutions it does mean making some assumptions, simplifications and generalisations. The outlines below are meant to be illustrative rather than authoritative to every situation and wage packet. So much can vary, as a consequence of the complexity, the range of assets and creativity demanded on the instructional design.

The comparison is based on the duration and resource demands more than the quality of output which would be subject to the talents and participation of the project team overall. This also focuses purely on the development phase of the project. The Scoping, Deployment and Impact Evaluation phases are excluded.

Internal Development

The vast majority of “rapid” development activity happens through internal e-learning departments using generic tools.

The 3 Week e-learning Team Scenario

In terms of the “total cost of employment”, a single internal e-learning team member is likely to cost in the region of £400 per “available” development day.

Here “total cost of employment” covers the total business cost of an employee including, building costs, support cost, IT costs, pension, salary and benefits. It’s more than remuneration. Appendix A includes an example of this calculation. This cost measure also takes into consideration when your resource wouldn’t be available to create content such as holidays, training days and meeting days. With these in mind, you have a more meaningful comparison to external development rates.

The effort required to complete a “rapid” 3 week project will probably take an equivalent of 4 weeks resource time. So, a 3 week project duration with 20 days resource commitment would have an internal cost of development of around £8,000.

Obviously, if the subject matter expert’s daily rate is lower than £400 per available development day, then the true cost of having the subject matter expert create their own content using prescribed tools will be lower, and vice versa if their rate is higher.

External Development Partner

For materials developed by an external development partner, generally speaking, you should be estimating to spend in the region of £6,000 to £10,000 for a notional hours worth of rapid e-training content.

In the simplest terms you can look at a 45 screen course being developed onsite with a generic tool taking a week of development time. In the leanest model, where you would look to have an instructional designer working side by side with your subject matter expert, supported by an off-site graphics team the following outline would probably be indicative of the overall costs.

The first assumption is that the daily rate of a good “rapid” instructional designer/developer/graphics expert is in the region of £500 a day. So, for that week’s work you are looking at:

The One Week Model

Activity	Cost
1 st Week - Onsite Development the Resource	£2,500
Programming and Graphics work	£1,000
Total	£3,500

The caveat around this estimate is that your subject matter expert is very well prepared and well scripted with their materials across the course you are creating. If they are not, then your development could easily be extended across two or three weeks. The cost of materials over a two to three week timeframe would not necessarily lead to proportionately higher back office and graphics costs.

The Second Week – Incremental Costs

Activity	Cost
2 nd Week - Onsite Development the Resource	£2,500
Programming and Graphics work	£1,000
Total	£3,500
Grand Total	£7,000

The Third Week- Incremental Costs

Activity	Cost
3 rd Week - Onsite Development the Resource	£2,500
Programming and Graphics work	£500
Total	£3,000
Grand Total	£10,000

Again the assumption is that there is only marginally more graphics and back office work and that most of the activity is refinements rather than purely asset creation.

Shared expectations = more accurate costs = less disappointment

This is purely a guide and depending on your preparedness, complexity and richness of interactions these figures would require adjustment. Based on these figures you should have some reasonably compelling content that is graphically alive and with a moderate level of screen to screen interactivity. What it is essential to do is to put some markers down about your expectations around the quality of material you want as your output. This will come easily if your internal team can set some benchmark examples of say five

screen to screen designs with our subject matter expert, even if it’s a non-functional mock up in PowerPoint. This will enable you to at least to create a shared expectation that you will be able to set early in the engagement process.

Comparing External Traditional & Rapid e-learning Approaches

What do you do?

How do those costs compare with a more traditional external approach?

Based on those estimates a notional hours worth of “rapid” content will cost £10,000. For a notional piece of comparable Traditional content you would probably be looking at £20,000.

At this point the questions are:

- 1) Is the Traditional Content twice as good, at twice the price?
- 2) Is £10,000 enough of an investment to guarantee success....?

The answer to those questions is probably difficult to prove scientifically, there is lamentably little research on the differential pound for pound impact of different e-learning development approaches on learner effectiveness. A conspiracy theorist would call this a silence of convenience. So, what is the right thing to do in the absence of evidence and certainty?

Perhaps, the sensible thing to do is spread the risk.

Consider mixing the approaches together – especially when time isn't a severe pressure and there is project management resource available to manage a longer process.

What would this potentially look like?

Solution	Duration	Cost
“rapid” Content	35 minutes	£4,000 to £5,000
Rich Traditional Content	30 minutes	£12,000 to £14,000
Support, Coaching / Mentoring	1 Month	£5,000
Grand Total		£20,000

The key element is that you are responsible for creating a performance outcome – so harnessing the different energies and influence of more traditional outputs with “rapid” outcomes may well create a larger impact than either of them as a lone entity. Ideally, you want to create the best combination of materials that will make that outcome the most likely.

It is possible to envisage a situation where a “rapid” outcome could help accelerate your learners into their learning curve earlier by acting as an early introduction. You could look to source - 35 minutes worth of “rapid” material and for this to act as a starting point for a baseline level of learning.

Traditional outcomes could then follow a little later, to create a deeper impact with its greater and shorter focus. There shouldn’t be too much of a lag in deploying the second phase, because the traditional course is

shorter it should arrive perhaps a week or two after the first deliverable is being worked through. It should have a shorter development time because it is shorter in duration and effort.

So, the Traditional content can act as a deeper stimulus, which through its richer instructional design will create deeper learning. It can prompt deeper thinking from learners by using a more open ended and challenging style.

Then there is still £5,000 left for coaching, mentoring and support for critical audiences.

However, if the reduction in the traditional materials does not translate into “half the price for half the duration”, due to production overheads; you really need to consider if short courses are suitable for traditional production at all.

Choose Between Cheaper or MORE

So, the ultimate choice around Rapid e-learning and those solutions is, do you buy cheaper, or do you think about whether you can buy more? That may well have reverberations outside of your organisation. That may have an impact on the e-learning market place overall.

Insights...

“there is a lamentably little research on the differential pound for pound impact of different e-learning development approaches on learner effectiveness. “



NEXT STEPS

Summary

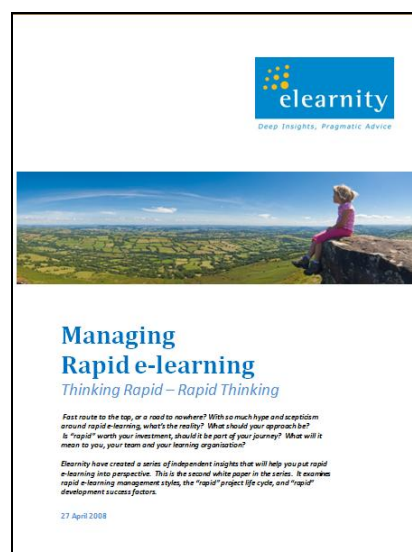
So, in summary, “rapid” means that your solution is delivered in three weeks or less. To some extent it is very closely enabled and defined by the tools that you use; and there is more to Rapid e-learning than creating rapid e-training materials. There are some subjects that “rapid” may be very suited to, and you may have to temper your ambition by focussing on realistic outcomes. Most importantly you need to consider how you use it as part of an overall blend of learning interventions. There are real and genuine concerns about Rapid e-learning, and this is enshrined in the whole debate on what is “good enough”. And even when “rapid” may be the best approach, circumstances may make its adoption impractical.

Rapid e-learning does have a place in your e-learning repertoire, anything that makes learning materials available at the pace that modern businesses move, and at a lower cost, are too compelling to ignore. As the economic climate starts to cool and purse strings tighten, it’s going to be an increasingly attractive method to use.

The Next Piece in the Rapid e-learning Jigsaw

Processes and the dynamics of a Rapid e-learning project are the next critical element of what makes Rapid e-learning truly “rapid”. And the processes you use will be inextricably linked to the way you implement “rapid” into your organisation.

In our second Elearnity white paper, we explore the fundamentals of managing Rapid e-learning. We’ll review management styles, team organisation, consider the “rapid” project life cycle, its processes, how you manage course redundancy, examine how “rapid” effects your relationship with suppliers, and explore the critical factors for working through a “rapid” project successfully.



Managing Rapid e-learning

This white paper will be available to download from
www.elearnity.com.

Accelerate and De-risk

To talk to us about our research on Rapid e-learning, or to discuss what it might specifically mean for your organisation please contact us at info@elearnity.com.

We will use our independent expertise to provide you with the guidance you need to accelerate and de-risk your decisions. We have a wealth of experience, tools, research and profiles at our disposal. We don't have any "products" to sell and we have no "vested interest" to bias your outcomes. We concentrate on pragmatic, independent advice.

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Appendix A

Total Internal Employee Cost

Here is a sample calculation based on a salary of £35k. Please do not take this as being definitive. It's for illustration purposes only.

Item	Cost (£)	Running total (£)	Notes
Recruitment and salary			
Salary	£35,000	£35,000	1
Recruitment fee or advertising/selection costs	£2,333	£37,333	2
Class 1 NICs (12.8% on earnings above Earnings Threshold [£100 a week=£5200 a year])	£3,516	£40,850	3
Typical optional benefits			
Company car	£0	£40,850	4
Generic Benefits & Discounts	£300	£41,150	
Health care	£1,000	£42,150	5
Life assurance	£100	£42,250	
Pension	£2,100	£44,350	
Bonus	£1,050	£45,400	
Subtotal for NICs calculation	£4,550	£49,950	
Class 1A NICs (P111D)	£582	£50,532	6
Employee-specific costs			
Software licences	£1,200	£51,732	7
Training, CPD	£1,200	£52,932	8
Workstation	£9,041	£61,973	9
Travel & Subsistence	£3,600	£65,573	
Apportionment of cost of business			
Share of other overheads (buildings excluding workstation areas, insurances [death-in-service, key worker, public liability, employer's liability], ...)	£1,000	£66,573	10
Depreciation on capital equipment (PC, desk, chair, filing cabinet etc)	£200	£66,773	11
Consumables (paper, toner, coffee, toilet paper)	£500	£67,273	12
Administrative overheads (non-project administration, HR, payroll, secretarial).	£2,404	£69,677	13

Other financial and disruptive costs			
Maternity/paternity leave	£0	£69,677	14
Unfair dismissal claims	£0	£69,677	14
Redundancy	£0	£69,677	14
Jury service	£0	£69,677	14

Productive working days	Days	Running total	Notes
Weekdays in a year	261	261	15
Holidays (usually minimum 20)	25	236	15
Statutory holidays	8	228	16
Formal training	10	218	17
CPD, reading, learning, self-directed training	10	208	18
Sick days	4	204	19
Wasted/unproductive time	30	174	20
Total costs/working days	£400	per day	